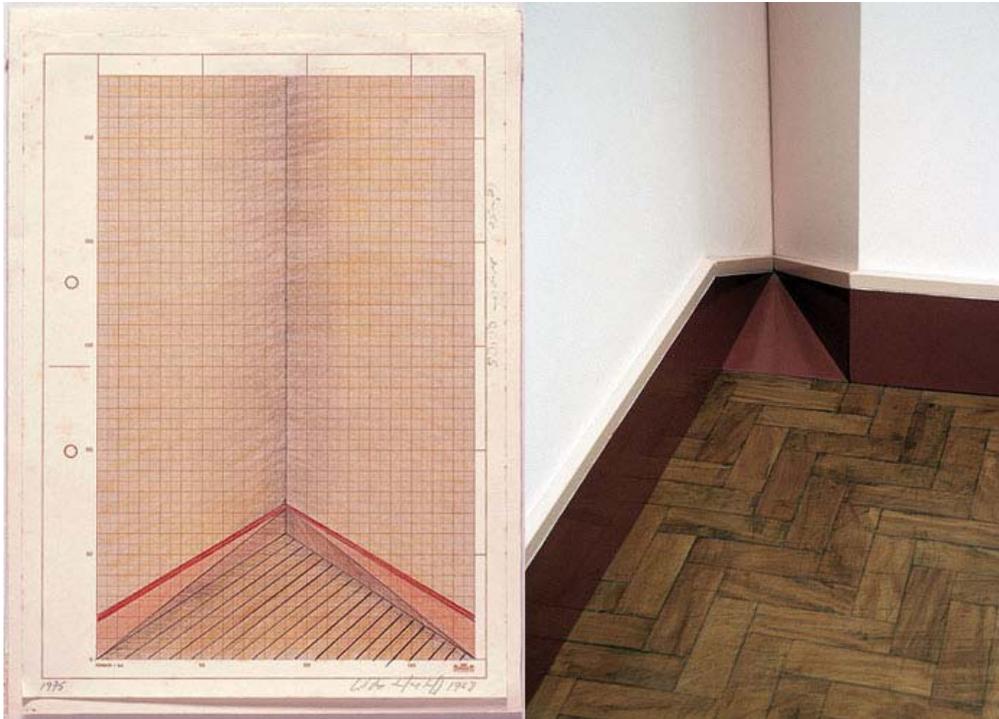


Corner



Cildo Meireles, 2 works from *Virtual Spaces Corners*, 1968

A series of lines on millimetre graph paper that is slightly off white and grubby, aged and used, bearing the effort expended on it in graphite bruises; lines that are separated into the three which extend out to the edges of the paper, which pull in each direction away from the ageing surface; and the others, poised in the space marked out for them by the three like a startled nocturnal animal, stand together with a fragile unity which threatens to collapse under the gaze, a unity which coheres into object-hood out of the corner of the eye, but which is demure and unsure of itself under direct observation, ready at any moment to dissolve back into the mathematics of two dimensions.

This first small impression was repeated along the wall of the first room in the exhibition as a series of searches, as an attempt to adumbrate an ineffability hidden between the grid and surface of these sheets of paper, the denuding spotlight of the axes x y and z , and the incredulous eye of the observer. Like a row of unfamiliar taxidermic specimens frozen in glass cases, the exposed lines in each display were either huddled, slumped or erect, individually summarizing a possible characteristic of this postulated ineffability, and together laying out its contour.

The attempt seems absurd, the medium unforgiving. He is trying to find something within the framework of geometrical axioms that is different in kind and not just degree; he is trying to find meaning in the brutality of facts; he is trying to find sensitivity in the insensible and he does it with an essential earnestness which is disarming. These searches consist of so few lines that they bring to mind the first attempts of a schoolchild at drawing in "space", and it is precisely this innocence that disarms; it seems as though Meireles has had Euclid's system explained to him by his teacher, taught to him as a hermetic and preordained reality external to his existence, and whereas the other

students picked up their pencils to draw cubes and planes, Meireles stared at the page, troubled. How could this be called space?

It all existed before him, before any of them, it allowed for nothing which was not inherent in its logic, nothing which was not a predictable output of a limited set of factors; it was a frozen solid, impenetrable and the precise opposite of what his senses told him was space. There was no room for anything but itself. Forced to participate in the class, forced to accept the axioms and inscribe points and lines in the solid space of reason, he nonetheless looks for some room, for a place where something unexpected might occur, something not entirely predictable and wholly inherent in the system: and so we are gifted these half-formed creatures, the embryos of a poetic instinct struggling to be born, trying to find room for itself in a grid of answers.

Meireles continues this search on other pieces of the same type of paper, but swaps the axes for a floor, two walls and wainscoting; and by doing this -with the use of some colour pencils- transforms the specific potential for entombment embodied in Euclid's geometry into a generalised scenario of existential enquiry. The questions began to form themselves in the clarity of the classroom, where the subject found its object and injected itself into it, producing results which now spill into the everyday, which escape from the nowhere of Euclid to the ubiquitous somewhere of the corner of a room.

By substituting the axes for walls Meireles transfers his search within the structure of 3dimensional space into a search within the structure of habit; into the earnest and childlike efforts of someone who sees and will not accept the solid impenetrability of the quotidian, just as he couldn't that of geometry. The meagre resources of the point and line left Meireles with only enough material to form unstable speculations; here he is digging through a postulate necessary to the space of our habits -that rooms have corners, and corners are corners- and finds rich material resonant with familiarity and association through which he fashions remarkably comprehensible and lucid results.

The walls, the floors, the wainscoting fold, gently lean or suddenly fall away at an angle, each time vividly encompassing the potential for a moment of respite, a touch of interpretation, an infiltration of the banal with the ineffable. By the last of these pages, by the time you turn around to look at the one-to-one installation in which four of these have been materialised as testaments to a sort of unflinching positivity, an indefatigable resolution to interbreed incompatibilities; by the time you walk around them Meireles has primed you, sensitized you through a set of small drawings for the breath-taking series of shared contemplations which thankfully, for once, take you far away from the unbearable Euclidean vapidness of the Tate Modern.

Cildo Meireles:

"In some way you become political when you don't have a chance to be poetic. I think human beings would much prefer to be poetic."

This is what separates so many artists and poets from those that write about them.

In all the works on display Meireles finds ways of opening up possibilities, unseen potentials, he brings questions to light, he flicks the surface of normality and makes it undulate strangely; and in all of the works except Mission/Missions (How to build a Cathedral) he brings things to our attention by taking away from them some of their usual clarity, and by doing this opens up room to move and think in. Which is why when I read this part of Isaiah Berlin's "Final Retrospect", I felt compelled to include it, as it seemed to maintain, although far apart, at least a parallel trajectory to Meireles' work.

Isaiah Berlin

Extract from "Final Retrospect"

"Since the natural sciences are perhaps the greatest success story in the whole history of mankind, it seems absurd to suppose that man alone is not subject to the natural laws discovered by the scientists, (That, indeed, is what the eighteenth century philosophes maintained). The question is not, of course, whether man is wholly free of such laws –no one but a madman could maintain that man does not depend on his biological or psychological structure or environment, or on the laws of nature. The only question is: Is his liberty totally exhausted thereby? Is there not some corner in which he can act as he chooses, and not be determined to choose by antecedent causes? This may be a tiny corner of the realm of nature, but unless it is there, his consciousness of being free, which is undoubtedly all but universal –the fact that most people believe that, while some of their actions are mechanical, some obey their free will– is an enormous illusion, from the beginnings of mankind , ever since Adam ate the apple, although told not to do so, and did not reply, 'I could not help it, I did not do it freely, Eve forced me to do it.'"

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This text refers to a past retrospective of Cildo Meireles' works at the Tate Modern